Chapter 10

Developing Multicultural Counselling in an Australian University: Applying Hinduism to Counselling

Carl Vadivella Belle
Independent Researcher, Australia

ABSTRACT

Lifetime experiences have equipped the author with a broad and diverse background in approaching counselling and problem resolution. This has ranged from grief counselling to management of rural financial counselling and spiritual counselling. In 2004, the author was appointed Inaugural Hindu Chaplain at the Flinders University of South Australia, a position held until late 2007 (although his counselling role has continued until this day). The chaplaincy to which he was appointed was one of several that collectively comprised a multi-faith chaplaincy involving a team approach. The concept was one in which chaplains of different faiths would respect each other’s traditions, would eschew proselytization, and would work cooperatively to mount joint educational and community interest projects. However, at the more fundamental level, his role consisted of providing chaplaincy services to Hindu students and staff studying or employed at Flinders University. (Increasingly this role extended to members of the other two universities based in Adelaide, neither of which possessed a Hindu chaplain.)

INTRODUCTION

In January 2004 the Hindu Society of South Australia nominated me to become Hindu Chaplain to the Flinders University of South Australia, a university containing an enrolment of 25,000 students and located in Adelaide’s southern suburbs. This appointment was subsequently ratified by the University Council and I commenced duties in late February. I was the first Hindu Chaplain to be appointed to any Australian University.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6073-9.ch010
BACKGROUND

Although I was new to chaplaincy I was familiar with the concept of counselling. Between 1976 and 1979 I had been posted to the Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, where the bulk of my work had consisted of organising the placement in Australia of trainees nominated by the Malaysian Government under the auspices of Australian funded aid programs. These ranged from an annual intake of senior secondary school students and undergraduates to postgraduates and specialist ad hoc trainees (many of whom occupied prominent positions in management and business). Prior to my posting I had been provided with a series of briefings which were designed to familiarize me with the political and cultural realities of Malaysian life. I rapidly discovered that these had left me ill-prepared for the complexities of my appointment, or to decipher the myriad of ethnic, religious, socio-economic, educational and linguistic issues which dominated Malaysian political discourse. I quickly learned that within Malaysia culture and religious beliefs were intertwined far more comprehensively that was the case in deeply secular Australia, and that if I hoped to understand those with whom I was dealing, I would need to acquire a working knowledge of all the major religions practiced in Malaysia. I also learned the importance of, as far as possible, providing advice to students within the context of the cultural framework with which they were acquainted.

Some years later (1992-2004) I chaired the Barossa, Hills and Plains Rural Counselling Service Incorporated. In addition I served for two years as the State Secretary of the South Australian Association of Rural Counselling, and several more years on the State Executive. Both organisations were jointly funded by the Australian and South Australian Governments. In addition the Barossa body received support, mainly in-kind, from local government and various community groups. The Service was dedicated to providing financial counselling and where appropriate advisory options to rural producers and associated business organisations. At this point Australian rural producers were subject to a series of challenges. These included unstable commodity demand, fluctuating prices, and comprehensive industry restructuring. These issues were complicated by seasonal problems such as drought, bushfires and mouse plagues. We were also required to respond to financial crises resulting from emergencies, mainly devastation resulting from bushfires and floods. Our region incorporated a wide array of enterprises which not only included broad acre farming but also horticulture, viticulture, livestock, poultry production, and market gardening. Market gardening engaged a considerable number of recent migrant families, mainly of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Indian background, and the Service was required to devise new and innovative approaches to ensure that all potential clientele were aware of the range of counselling that we offered, that such counselling was free and confidential, that we operated entirely independently of the government, and that there was no shame or stigma in requesting our assistance.

During those years I acted as a sounding board for several counsellors for a strategy known as “de-briefing”. This involved counsellors discussing in some detail the more stressful cases with which they had been dealing (without, of course, breaching confidentiality). The management of Rural Counselling Services throughout South Australia believed that regular de-briefing was an essential means of avoiding emotional fatigue (or “burn-out”) among counselling staff. Financial stress often produces a range of subsidiary conditions which, if left unchecked, may actually prove life threatening. These conditions include depression, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, feelings of alienation, inadequacy and helplessness, serious eating disorders, and in extreme cases, suicide. Moreover rural producers forced to sell properties due to financial pressures, especially those which had been held by the same